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UNPACKING HOW DIGITAL ENDORSEMENT OF SPORTS CELEBRITIES AFFECTS FAN BEHAVIOR

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Traditionally, endorsement deals require athletes to wear the brands logo/clothing at certain events, to talk about the brand or participate in a campaign which is expressed through traditional media like television or printed media. Yet, social networking sites have emerged as accessible channels for fans to remain active with sport consumption. The importance of social media marketing is increasingly changing the type of endorsement deals between athlete and brand. Athletes are required to use their personal social media profiles to promote the sponsored brand, given that fans tend to follow the decisions of sports celebrities whose opinion they trust or whose lifestyles they wish to imitate. For instance, the Portuguese football star Cristiano Ronaldo tweeted a video of him starring in the 'Spark Brilliance' commercial in Summer, 2016. Although previous studies have argued for the importance of celebrity endorsement in the context of traditional advertising, the paucity of research has attempted to create an elaborate framework to discuss the role that sports celebrities play in influencing the fans' behavior in virtual communities. This study aims to provide a comprehensive model to illustrate how a famous athlete's presence in social media can influence consumers to purchase the endorsed brands. Our study employs an online survey to investigate the interrelationships between sport involvement, role model influence, community identification, celebrity worship, celebrity brand fit, brand familiarity and purchase intention. The measures of all seven constructs used Likert-type scales (1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree). The scale items were adapted from extant literature and modified to fit the context of sports' virtual community. The survey questionnaire was firstly pretested on 43 participants. Qualified participants were selected via a screener question in the beginning of the questionnaire where they had to participate in an online community of any famous athlete in social networking sites in the past 6 months. The Cronbach alpha values for seven constructs in the proposal model were above 0.8, demonstrated adequate reliability. Therefore, all measures were retained for the main survey. The online questionnaires of the main survey were distributed to sports' communities via a research panel company (Cint) that has a reach of 20 million people in 70 countries. 441 valid cases were obtained after eliminating incomplete questionnaires. Partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) was undertaken to test 12 hypotheses via SmartPLS 2.0 (Ringle et al., 2005), because PLS-SEM

was preferred in comparison to covariance-based SEM. The PLS technique was considered appropriate for this study, because it assesses the values of the variables for predictive purposes (Hair et al., 2011). The significance of the paths in the model was tested using a bootstrap resample procedure with 5000 re-samples. This final sample consisted of 67.6% males and 32.4% females. Most participants were Asian (37.2%), European (30.2%) and 25.9% from North America, representing age ranges of 20-29 (49.0%), 30-39 (28.1%) and 40-49 (12.7%) years. Of those surveyed, 57.8%, 22.4% and 15.9% indicated that they used Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, respectively, to follow athletes' communities. The results show that all hypotheses were supported by our data. The relationship between celebrity-brand fit and brand familiarity was found to be the strongest, followed by the relationship between sport involvement and role model influence. Our empirical findings offer strong support for the importance of social identity theory and celebrity worship for fan-brand relationship development in the context of online sports' communities. These findings further illustrate how the use of social networking sites can function as a feasible mechanism to associate brands with sports celebrities. Fans are more likely to associate particular brands with the celebrity endorser, which leads to building brand credibility (Spry et al., 2011). Digital endorsement of sports celebrities are perceived to be credible and effective when communicating marketing messages to fans. This study contributes to sport marketing literature and provides practical implications.

KEYWORDS: social networking site, online sport community, fan-brand relationship, sports celebrity, social identity theory

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